United Nations A/C.4/61/SR.21

General Assembly
Sixty-first session

Official Records

Distr.: General
11 December 2006

Original: English

Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee)

Summary record of the 21st meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Thursday, 2 November 2006, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. Acharya ..... (Nepal)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

Agenda item 31: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (*continued*) (A/61/13, 172, 278, 347 and 358)

1. **Mr. Gidor** (Israel) said that assistance to the Palestinian people was central to Israeli policy, for improving their economic and living conditions was integral to stability in the region. Israel also continued to attach great significance to the activities of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and understood the difficult conditions under which the Agency operated. While it was his Government's policy to facilitate the Agency's operations as much as possible, it was very often prevented from doing so by murderous terrorist activities that disrupted any normalcy. That was the crux of the matter: security issues unfortunately impinged on the smooth operation of UNRWA. Since 2005, for instance, there had been 11 often deadly attacks on the main humanitarian crossing point between Israel and the Gaza Strip alone. The 1967 agreement between Israel and UNRWA had foreseen that military security needs might become a factor; and UNRWA itself had accepted the reality that restrictions on movement of goods and individuals might at times be necessary if only to protect the lives also of its own personnel. Even so, notwithstanding the unavoidable restrictions on various crossing points, there had been a marked increase in the Palestinian trade flow and a concomitant if modest improvement in the Palestinian economic indicators.

2. There had been two major developments in 2006, since the period covered by the Commissioner-General's report (A/61/13): the election of a Hamas terrorist Government, which had triggered a chain of events leading to more hardship for all in the region; and the Palestinian terrorist attack in June 2006, which had demanded an Israeli military response.

3. Israel had hoped that, once it had left Gaza, the Palestinian Authority would boost its nation-building efforts and take over the UNRWA responsibilities related to education, health and food security, but unfortunately the challenge had not been met.

4. The report produced by the Commissioner-General was refreshingly factual, balanced and forward looking. Indeed, the dialogue between UNRWA and the Israeli authorities had in 2006 been most constructive and there had been good coordination on both general and practical issues.

5. Each year in the Committee, there was a long parade of Arab diplomats outdoing each other in expressions of hyperbolic sympathy for the suffering of the Palestinian refugees. The hard facts, however, spoke differently. According to the UNRWA website, the most generous donors to its 2005 budget were the European Union, followed by the United States of America and then Japan and a number of other European countries. The only Arab country that had made an even comparable contribution had been Saudi Arabia; the other States in the region, if they gave at all, had made contributions that were only a small fraction of those of the other donors. It was true that the Syrian Arab Republic had transferred significant sums to the Palestinian Authority, but that money had unfortunately gone to funding terrorist cells and jihadist organizations rather than to the Palestinian refugees. In short, not a single Arab country was prepared to spend any more than a miniscule part of its ever-increasing oil revenues in order to help alleviate their plight. At the same time, his Arab colleagues preferred to continue squandering the United Nations budget on repetitive sessions, inefficient committees, endless resolutions and useless documents which did absolutely nothing to improve the situation on the ground or help the prospects for peace.

6. UNRWA had after almost 60 years become the second biggest employer within the Palestinian Authority, performing functions normally undertaken by a government, namely, elementary education, public health and food security; and Israel believed that actually served to perpetuate the problem. In the long term, such daily tasks and the budgets for them should be transferred from the Agency to governmental bodies in the Palestinian Authority, in Jordan and elsewhere.

7. All people should be able to live in security and peace and to prosper. The Palestinians were not Israel's enemies, they were its neighbours. Israel sought to live side by side with them in mutual respect and dignity. Both peoples' suffering was a humanitarian problem and both peoples' right to self-determination must be respected.

8. **Mr. Ross** (United States of America) said that his Government, concerned about the hardships the Palestinian people faced, was providing close to $500 million in assistance for their basic social and

private sector needs. As the largest contributor to UNRWA after the European Union, it had consistently demonstrated its support for humanitarian relief for the Palestinian refugees and it urged other countries, especially those within the region, to give more to the Agency's core budget.

9. UNRWA was a stabilizing force in the region. As the main provider of education, primary health services and other humanitarian assistance for 70 per cent of the population in Gaza and 30 per cent in the West Bank, its role in those fields had been especially critical since the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections. The failure of the government of the Palestinian Authority to renounce terror, recognize Israel and respect previous agreements continued to create unnecessary hardships for the Palestinian people.

10. His Government was pleased that UNRWA had responded to recommendations to improve its management by designing a three-year organizational development process and that it was in the process of improving its planning by developing an overall programme strategy. The newly expanded Advisory Commission was providing substantive advice to the Commissioner-General on matters related to programming and the budget.

11. Consistent with United Nations reform and revitalization efforts, the United States of America again called upon the General Assembly to expedite its work by biennializing and triennializing items where possible. His delegation believed that it was unnecessary to continue to adopt additional resolutions on UNRWA at that juncture.

12. **Mr. Gebreel** (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya) said that the Government of Israel was responsible for the situation on the ground in the Occupied Territories. The report showed the indifference of the Israeli occupying forces to international laws and humanitarian norms, including the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949. The continuing construction of the separation wall had restricted the movements of people and had prevented the Agency from gaining access to refugee camps. Attacks on Agency institutions and staff had continued, a number of civilian casualties had been reported and the standard of living had dropped below the poverty line. As witnessed in July 2006, the Israeli authorities had extended their attacks to camps in southern Lebanon. It was important to consider the political origin of the situation and remember that the work of the Agency must be a temporary arrangement until a final solution was found that included the return of the refugees to the homes from which they had been evacuated.

13. **Mr. Al-Zayani** (Bahrain) said that the report and the introductory statement by the UNRWA Commissioner-General drew attention to both the Agency's setbacks and its achievements. The Working Group on the Financing of the Agency had commended the role of the Commissioner-General and her oversight of the reform process. There was no doubt that the establishment of the Advisory Commission would allow for a review of the Agency's programme of work, including efforts to increase its administrative and humanitarian capacity.

14. The hostile campaign of the Israeli forces against the Palestinian people had led to casualties and a deterioration in the living conditions of Palestinians. The restrictions in movement and curfews had resulted in increased poverty and unemployment in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, divided the occupied territories and hindered the Agency's capacity to fulfil its mandate of providing humanitarian assistance and promoting human resource development, in violation of the agreements concluded between the Agency and the Government of Israel. The continued construction of the separation wall, contrary to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice had accentuated the economic downturn. Furthermore, the separation wall, curfews and land confiscation were the most influential factors in determining the living conditions of the Palestinians and greatly restricted the potential for urban and agricultural development in that region.

15. The Working Group's report showed that the 2006-2007 budget was 30 per cent lower than in the previous biennium. It was important to reduce that funding deficit in order to allow the Agency to fulfil its mandate and cope with the increase in the number of refugees. A needs-based funding approach not subject to financial restrictions should be adopted that would make it possible to fully fund programmes, enhance refugees' financial means and meet their basic needs. Funding difficulties notwithstanding, the support of donors had enabled the Agency to make considerable progress. His delegation was confident that the Agency would be able to transcend the financial crisis and move ahead with reform plans. At the core of the humanitarian crisis was a political problem and it was important for the Agency to continue its indispensable

work until a solution could be found in accordance with United Nations resolutions.

16. **Mr. Al-Maamari** (Oman) said that his delegation appreciated the work of the Agency in assisting the refugees who suffered displacement, deprivation and lack of basic services. It was the responsibility of the occupying forces to alleviate the suffering of all refugees in the Occupied Territories. While the Agency's main role under its mandate was to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees and not to address political problems, in practice there was a link between providing humanitarian assistance and the political dimensions of the refugee problem. The Agency should highlight in its reports the root causes of refugee suffering. It was obvious that such suffering was caused by the bombing, killing, demolition of houses, deportation and construction of the separation wall carried out by the Israeli occupying forces.

17. General Assembly resolution 194 (III) stipulated that the right of return of all the Palestine refugees and the right to compensation of those refugees who did not wish to return was a prerequisite for establishing a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East. The conflict in the Middle East was a result of the Government of Israel's refusal to abide by international law. His delegation recognized the right of all refugees to return to their homeland in accordance with international law and called on Member States to put pressure on Israel to end its practices against Palestinians, stop hindering the work of the Agency and fulfil its international obligations. Member States should maintain their support for the Agency and those host countries that had accepted the refugees.

18. **Ms. Al Alaoui** (Morocco) expressed appreciation to the host countries for their support of the refugees and to the donors for their financial assistance. It was important to consider the activities of the Agency in the context of the very serious situation in the Middle East. The suspension of international assistance, the economic blockade, the demolition of homes and the construction of the separation wall had sparked a humanitarian crisis and had stretched the Agency's resources. The Agency should be supported in carrying out its important task of providing basic services to the refugees.

19. She called on Israel to put an end to its restrictions on the Agency and to allow it to fulfil its mandate. Until a final and just solution was found to the question of Palestine refugees in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III), Member States should maintain or increase their financial support for the Agency, with a view to enabling it to fulfil its mandate in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan. Her Government fully supported the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and the pursuit of a just and comprehensive peace agreement in accordance with relevant Security Council resolutions, the principle of land for peace and the road map.

20. **Archbishop Migliore** (Observer for the Holy See) commended UNRWA for meeting new challenges in the midst of the violence and military activity in the Middle East. Many of the issues raised in the Commissioner-General's report were symptoms of a much larger issue: the fundamental injustice at the root of the conflict. Each party was forced to live in fear either of potentially deadly acts of terror or of potentially deadly military incursions.

21. The centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the instability in the Middle East could not be ignored. The Holy See remained convinced that the two-State solution was the basis for resolving the crisis, for it would permit Israelis to live in security in their own land and Palestinians to live safely in a viable State of their own. That could be achieved only if the international community, and in particular the Quartet, shouldered the responsibility that fell to them of speedily engaging the Israelis and Palestinians in substantive dialogue coupled with dispute resolution, while maintaining a balanced approach in negotiations that avoided the insistence on preconditions.

22. A lasting solution must also determine the status of the Holy City of Jerusalem. In view of the restrictions on free movement posed by the security barrier, the Holy See reiterated its support for internationally guaranteed provisions that ensured freedom of religion and of conscience for the inhabitants of Jerusalem as well as unhindered access to the holy places by the faithful of all religions and nationalities. Only through a just and lasting peace — not imposed, but secured through negotiation and reasonable compromise — would the legitimate aspirations of all the people of the Holy Land be fulfilled.

23. **Mr. Taleb** (Syrian Arab Republic), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that once again Israel

had attempted to whitewash ugly facts and had put forward nauseating lies to the effect that his country was supporting jihadist and other terrorist movements. The image of the Israeli occupation, however, could not be beautified: the facts concerning Zionist terrorism, committed covertly by successive Israeli Governments over five decades, were well documented. Only that morning there had been a deadly Israeli incursion into Gaza.

24. It was the historic responsibility of the United Nations to secure the inalienable rights of the Palestine refugees, particularly the right to return to their homelands — guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights — and their right to compensation.

25. Syrian assistance to the Palestinian people could not be calculated in figures but rather in terms of the economic burden his Government assumed in seeking to provide a decent standard of living for the Palestine refugees until they were able to return.

26. **Mr. Hijazi** (Observer for Palestine), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that despite the Israeli delegation's protestation of his Government's supposedly benevolent policies and service to millions of Palestinians, it was clear that the Palestinian people had never chosen to live for decades in deprivation and destitution, or to be denied the right to claim what was theirs. That was the core of the issue and the key to its resolution. He wondered what kind of reaction one would expect from the Palestinian people that Israel might find appropriate. The Palestinian people, having endured bombardment and the miserable conditions imposed by the occupying Power, had valid security needs which they must defend.

27. The United Nations must free them from a life of daily terror. Peace must be the aim. The perpetuation of Israeli occupation and constant violation of every human right, especially the recognized right of return, could not be countenanced.

28. **Mr. Al-Otaibi** (Kuwait), responding to the Israeli delegation's purported concern for UNRWA financing, observed that the Arab countries contributed to the Palestinian refugees through the Arab League in amounts that went far beyond the entire budget of UNRWA.

29. Israel was the cause of the problem, with its continuing occupation and inhuman practices. It should abide by its agreement with UNRWA and lift restrictions on the movement of the Agency's personnel, and fulfil its international obligations to alleviate the sufferings of the Palestinian people and work towards a permanent and comprehensive settlement of the problem in the Middle East.

30. **Ms. Koning AbuZayd** (Commissioner-General, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) observed that the broad, consistent financial and institutional support of diverse Governments — the Agency's biggest donors with their contributions to the General Fund and the emergency projects, the host countries, and the Arab Gulf countries, with their contributions to projects and infrastructure that were not costed so clearly in the annual report but were certainly a major input — was compelling confirmation that the international community remained committed to the well-being of the Palestine refugees. The support was critical in the light of the current conditions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, particularly in Gaza. She had made note of the statements made by members of the Committee on the various aspects of the problem. She had also taken note of the positive developments in the region, such as Lebanon's early recovery from a devastating conflict and the Government's landmark decision to allow for an improvement of refugee living conditions.

31. She hoped that renewed engagement by the international community to resolve the conflict in the Occupied Palestinian Territory would improve the untenable humanitarian situation, in the midst of which the Agency, with its improved management and programme planning, remained an essential lifeline.

The meeting rose at 11.40 a.m.